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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the use of arts games (structured play activities based on drama, movement, and music) with children age birth to 5 years in a day care setting. A set of 20 games was tested by 2 early childhood teachers; 1 teacher tested 10 games with a group of 2-year-olds and the other tested a different set of 10 games with a group of 4-year-olds. The teachers worked at a day care center in an inner city in Australia serving a culturally and socioeconomically diverse community. Teachers were given detailed descriptions of the games, including required equipment, suggested group size, procedures, and possible variations. They presented each game at least three times over a period of 6 weeks. Results indicated that the teachers would continue to use 13 of the 20 games in the version provided or in a modified version. They described over 75 percent of the games as developmentally appropriate for their children. Four factors influenced successful implementation: (1) grouping of children, especially group size; (2) children's interest and motivation, encouraged through positive reinforcement and accurate verbal feedback; (3) teachers' modifications and strategies, especially those to meet the needs of individual children; and (4) teacher confidence, related to the aspects of the games they chose to emphasize. Teachers generally found written instructions for the games very clear but noted that games requiring singing provoked anxiety. The teachers reported high levels of child enjoyment while playing the games. (Contains 23 references.) (KDFB)

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ARTS GAMES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Arts activities assume an important place in education programs for young children. Arts games are structured play activities based on drama, movement, music or any combination of these. They always involve at least one adult, who usually initiates and guides the play for varying numbers of children. Some games are played with one adult and one child, while others are group experiences.

This research is an investigation of arts games for children from birth to five years of age in a long day care setting. A set of traditional, folk and original drama, movement and music games was compiled by the researchers. The games were trialled by two early childhood teachers, one with a group of 2-year olds and the other with a group of 4-year olds. The teachers presented each game at least three times over a period of six weeks.

The teachers' reflections on the arts games themselves, their implementation and the children's responses provide the data for this study. Issues related to which arts games were favoured by the teachers; the factors that influenced implementation; the potential of the games to facilitate learning, creativity and artistry; and whether written descriptions provide an effective means of games transmission are examined.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators seeking to provide a high quality education program within their settings acknowledge the critical importance of the arts as a component of the curriculum.

An examination of the literature related to early childhood games indicates the terms *games*, *play*, *play experiences* and *activities* are used interchangeably (Hartcher, Pape & Nicosia, 1988; Payne, 1993; Schaefer & Cole, 1990). Other researchers (Kamii & De Vries, 1980) have offered commendable explorations of the uses and benefits of games across curriculum areas but have not specifically examined them in the context of an integrated drama, movement and music curriculum for children aged from birth to five years of age.

The fragmented nature of early childhood arts research is evidenced by the significant numbers of studies that concentrate almost exclusively on one particular arts area such as drama (Haywood, 1981) or music (Barrett, 1993). Whilst such studies may offer useful insights, there is not always a strong link between the arts area under examination and other related arts areas.

Many studies investigating arts and games concentrate on children over three years of age (Brown, Sherrill & Gench, 1981; Deal, 1993; Howells, 1982; Lucky, 1990; Taunton & Colbert, 1984). Commonly, studies dealing with babies and toddlers do not address fully integrated drama, movement and music programs but, rather, explore a specific focus such as art and music (Kovacs & Albright, 1986), infant locomotion (Goldfield, 1989), perceptual motor development (Yonas & Hartman, 1993) or symbolic representational ability (Masur, 1993).

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There is strong consensus in the literature that developmentally appropriate, well planned and competently executed arts experiences result in positive outcomes for young children (Brodhecker, 1987; Dyer & Schiller, 1993; Larkin & Suthers, 1994; Leninowitz & Gordon, 1987; McMahon, 1986; Wright, 1991). Such outcomes include child autonomy, decision making and imagination; identity, self image and confidence; perceptual motor development; communication, tolerance and cognitive growth and development.

Arts games uniquely provide structured play experiences that are based on drama, movement, music or any combination of these. Such games always involve at least one adult who commonly initiates, facilitates and guides the play with the participating child or children. Arts games are diverse in nature, ranging from a simple rhyme shared with an infant at nappy change time, through to an energetic movement and music experience involving a larger group of children and several adults. For children aged from birth to five years, arts games do not rely upon complex rules. The games emphasise cooperation rather than competition or elimination. With attention to group size, arts games do not involve lengthy periods 'waiting for a turn'. Rather, all participating children are productively engaged throughout. Importantly, arts games provide a structure for early childhood educators, who recognise the value of the arts in their curriculum design but express concerns about their personal competencies as teachers of drama, movement or music.

This paper seeks to outline the positive contribution of arts games in early childhood arts programs and in wider educational contexts. It describes the results of an investigation undertaken with children aged from two to five years in a long day care setting where a series of art games was implemented and evaluated. Through careful examination of the teachers' reflections on the trialling, some insight into the suitability of the games for use in early childhood programs is afforded.

In studying early childhood arts games, the researchers determined to investigate their use in a long day care setting where the games could be used with groups of children of differing ages and incorporated into their regular programs. Specifically, answers were sought to the following questions:

- Which arts games are favoured by the teachers? Why?
- Do arts games facilitate the learning and development of children aged from 2-5 years?
- What factor/s influence the implementation and outcomes of the arts games?
- Do written descriptions of arts games enable teachers to effectively learn and implement new games?
- Do arts games enable teachers to provide expanded opportunities for child creativity and artistry?
- What are the children's responses to arts games?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The centre that agreed to participate in the study was a 90-place inner city setting which catered for a culturally and socio-economically diverse community. The centre employs an early childhood trained teacher in each room. The Cloud Room (2 year olds) and the Sun Room (4 and 5-year olds) were chosen as these two teachers had very similar backgrounds. They had trained at the same institution and were both in their third year of teaching. Neither teacher had a particular interest or expertise in the arts. One of them, in fact, explained that she was quite apprehensive about singing. Whilst both teachers acknowledged the importance of arts experiences in early childhood curricula, both reluctantly admitted that their existing programs were limited in scope.

The researchers selected 20 arts games, ten suitable for 2 year olds and ten for 4 and 5-year olds. The games represented a variety of drama, movement and music experiences as well as some games that combined aspects of two or three arts. The games selected are listed in Table 1 (Larkin & Suthers, 1995).

TABLE 1

TWENTY ARTS GAMES USED IN THE PROJECT

GAMES FOR 2's	GAMES FOR 4's & 5's
Follow the sound	Action rap
Jack be nimble	Imitate the fall
Musical hoops	Lap ball
Over the stones	Little grey ponies
Pass the ball	Musical hoops
Roll the ball	Obwisana
Under and over	People skittles
Wake up you sleepyheads	Sound moves
What does the cow say?	Three ropes in a circle
Who's under the blanket	When I was one

The teachers were given a detailed description of each game which included equipment required, suggested group size, procedures for playing the game and possible variants to extend or modify each game. The precise nature of the implementation of each game was, however, determined by the teacher and included in her program as she deemed appropriate. The researchers asked only that each game be played at least three times over a six week period.

After every playing of a game, the teachers completed a comprehensive evaluation. They were asked to consider issues related to the game itself, their own role in the implementation of the game and the children's responses. Other items included contextual information such as the time of day, number of children and adults involved and whether the game had been played previously. Additional data were gathered when the researchers visited the centre to observe and video the children playing the games. The participating teachers were committed to the notion of action research, played all games and completed, in detail, 60 evaluations. Throughout the study, they demonstrated a strong commitment to the project and consistent levels of professionalism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the teachers' evaluations showed that a range of factors influenced the outcomes of the games. Most of the teachers' evaluations, however, took the form of guided reflection on the influence of factors such as group size, location, play space and attendance patterns on the children's responses; their own appraisal of the game and its appropriateness for their group; the teaching strategies used in implementation, any modifications devised; and their personal responses. The following provides an indication of the significant patterns and recurring trends that emerged from the data.

Arts games teachers favoured

The teachers were happy to incorporate all the arts games into their programs. As anticipated, they expressed preferences for particular games. They stated that they would definitely continue to use

seven of the 20 games in the version provided. Another six games they thought they would probably use in a modified version, or as a transition, or with a specific age-group. Their reported preferences may have been influenced by the participation of other staff, space, time, group size and composition and the teachers' own skill, teaching style, predilection for certain types of activities and confidence in the arts.

Arts games that facilitated learning and development

In their evaluations, the teachers described over 75% of the games as "developmentally appropriate" for the children they taught. Further, they believed that the games facilitated the children's development in a variety of domains, specifically physical, social and cognitive. The arts games provided opportunities for the development of physical skills such as running, jumping, ball handling skills, balance and coordination: social development was enhanced through working in groups, cooperating, taking turns and sharing space or equipment; cognitive skills such as memory, sequencing, counting, listening and problem solving were used; and opportunities for individualised responses gave children contexts in which to be creative and imaginative. For example, in *Musical hoops*, the children move or dance freely to teacher-selected recorded music. At various times during the game, the teacher stops the tape and the children run to stand in one of the hoops placed about the floor. Any number of children can go to the same hoop and there is no elimination. As a variant of the game, the teachers gradually removed hoops until, at the end, all the participating children had to squeeze into one or two hoops only. The teachers reported that this game provided opportunities for the children to develop physical skills through locomotor movement and dancing; social skills of cooperation and sharing space; cognitive skills such as auditory discrimination, naming the colours of the hoops, counting hoops or the number of children in one hoop. Creativity was exhibited particularly by the 4 and 5-year olds in their dancing, some of which was individual and some involved groups of two or three. The 2-year olds, as expected, generally preferred to jump, run or twirl on their own when the music was played.

Factors influencing the implementation of arts games

Analysis of the teachers' reflections and observations by the researchers indicated that four factors were influential in the successful playing of the arts games:

- grouping of children
- children's interest and motivation
- teachers' modifications and strategies
- teacher confidence

Grouping of children

Group size was seen as an important influence on the success of the games by both teachers. Each reported that they determined the group size for playing according to the nature of the game to be played. Games that required careful observation, discussion or individual responses such as *Who's under the blanket* and *Imitate the fall* were thought to be most effective with a small group while games where all children were active throughout such as *Wake up you sleepyheads* and *Action rap* could be successful with more children involved. Both teachers preferred to work with what they described as small- or medium-sized groups with only one adult facilitating the play. They noted that this allowed for easy participation by all children in the group, a minimum of waiting and facilitated teacher-child interactions. The teacher of the 2-year olds was quite explicit about her preference for a 'small group', and used groups of five to eight children in over 50% of occasions on which she played arts games. The teacher of the four and five year olds generally used a group of eight to fifteen children. Some of the games included for trialling needed more than one adult participant and the teachers felt this to be problematic to the extent that involving

another adult in the play automatically meant a larger group size. Both teachers generally used groups with a mix of girls and boys and included a range of chronological ages.

Selecting a suitable environment was an important consideration for both teachers in playing arts games. They used indoor and outdoor areas, frequently playing the same game in the playroom on one occasion and outside the next time. Whether indoors or out, the size of the play space was considered crucial by the teacher of the younger group. She stated that for nine of the ten games she played, a large space without any potential safety hazards was essential for the children to move about freely. Further, for some games that required listening, high levels of concentration or problem solving, she felt that ideally the space should also be free of distractions and noise. The teacher of the 4's and 5's was much less concerned about issues related to space. Two of the games *Over the stones* and *Little grey ponies* were also to be used by the teachers during the project as transitions when children were moving to the bathroom and going from the playroom to an outside area.

Children's interest and motivation

Both teachers reported that the children were generally enthusiastic and excited about playing games and quickly developed favourites. They recorded that little teacher motivation was required for the children to participate in the arts games. Frequently the sight of ropes, puppets, balls or musical instruments was sufficient to stimulate their interest . Once the children had played a game, simply inviting them to play it on subsequent occasions was all that was needed to have them clustering around, eager to begin. During the playing of the games, the most commonly used teaching strategies recorded by both teachers were positive reinforcement and accurate verbal feedback to individual children. The teacher of the 2-year olds noted that she most frequently praised the children for their efforts, offered encouragement and provided feedback to individuals. For example, 'Well done, Inez. You remembered to jump into the hoop when the music stopped.' She also found that her own participation was a powerful motivating factor for the children. It provided a model for the children, clearly demonstrated her involvement as a player, and some instances - such as crawling under a rope - caused hysterical laughter from the 2-year olds. Similarly, the teacher of the 4-year olds reported that motivating strategies were generally related to praising and supporting the children's endeavours, questioning to help the children find a solution to a problem and giving feedback to individuals. She also recorded that some of the strategies she employed were necessitated by the desire to manage child behaviour.

Teachers' modifications and teaching strategies

Both teachers also reported that they modified some games during implementation. Many of these modifications were spontaneous and in response to a child's suggestion. For example, in *What does the cow say?* the children make a variety of animal sounds. On one occasion, a child spontaneously flapped her 'wings' as she squawked in response to 'What does the cockatoo say?' The teacher reinforced this response and extended the idea by encouraging not only static actions but also whole body locomotor movements for animals as diverse as kangaroos, platypuses and kookaburras. The teachers also introduced some other modifications as a result of their initial implementation of a game. For example, taped music was added to *Pass the ball* and a song became part of the playing of *Who's under the blanket?* Other modifications were designed to specifically meet the needs of individual children or to incorporate a particular interest or challenge. The teacher of the four and five year olds encouraged a group of children to construct a barn from wooden blocks which they used in *Little Grey Ponies*. And the first time that the 2-year olds played *Jack be nimble*, the teacher used one wooden block as the candlestick. She observed that most children playing found jumping this quite easy. The next time they played, she used a large, upturned, wooden block to extend the children's jumping. This time, she noted that several of the players were unable to jump the larger block. On the third occasion that the children played *Jack be nimble*, she used two blocks of different heights and invited the children to choose the candlestick over which they wished to jump.

Teacher confidence

Teacher confidence was the fourth significant influence on the implementation of the games. As stated previously, neither teacher had a specialisation in the arts in their background or training. In fact, one stated that, 'Generally in drama, movement and music, I don't feel really confident'. The other agreed, adding, 'I would like to use a larger variety of games. I tend to stick to the same old things'. All the arts games except one were entirely new to the participating teachers and they had not used some of the equipment such as ropes, hoops and sticks previously in their arts program.

Another issue related to the teachers' background and confidence was which aspects of the games they chose to emphasise. Both readily seized opportunities that arose related to social, physical and cognitive development and were much less quick to capitalise on opportunities for extending creativity and artistry. The researchers attributed this aspect of their implementation to the fact that in both teachers' training, cognitive, physical and social/emotional development were covered in far greater depth than creativity. This emphasis was reflected in their practice.

Teachers' response to written descriptions of arts games

The implementation of the arts games required the participating teachers to read written descriptions of the games and transform these into dynamic arts experiences for their children. The teachers generally found the detailed instructions were very clear. Nevertheless, they felt more comfortable with some games than others and, in some, they happily incorporated both spontaneous and planned modifications. In their reflections both teachers perceived a link between their own confidence and the success of the implementation of a game. For example, one wrote of *Musical hoops* 'I felt confident with the game and, as a result, the children responded well. By contrast, in reflecting upon a playing of *Under and over*, she reported, 'I was a bit unsure so the game didn't seem to flow'. Generally, the games that provoked the most anxiety in the teachers were those that required them to sing a simple song during the play. The task of learning a new song from a written format rather than a tape or from a colleague was not always easy and sometimes uncertainty about whether it was 'correct' caused further concerns when it came to singing it with the children. The researchers believe there are clear implications regarding the necessity of preservice teacher education to provide experiences that help students develop confidence in singing and attempting new and unfamiliar arts activities.

Children's responses

Both teachers reported that the arts games provided positive experiences. They consistently reported high levels of enjoyment for the children. One teacher wrote that, 'The majority of the children love games, especially those which involve an element of role play (such as *People skittles* and *Little grey ponies*) or those which create suspense (like *Who's under the blanket* and *Wake up you sleepyheads*)'. The children also developed preferences for particular games which they demonstrated regularly by asking for their favourites. There were frequent requests for *Musical hoops* from the 2-year olds and the older children demanded *Action rap* on a regular basis. It was also reported that the children in both groups enjoyed the opportunities that arts games provided for individualised responses. The 2-year olds almost always responded to the stimulus of arts game on an individual basis, while the 4 and 5-year olds often worked in groups of two or three such as in what the teacher called cooperative group dancing.

As the teachers preferred to play the arts games in small or medium sized groups, second and third playings often involved children who had not been present previously. It was noted that these new players had no trouble quickly accommodating a new game by observing and imitating their peers. For the children involved in the study, arts games appeared to supplement their arts program in an enjoyable and positive way.

CONCLUSIONS

The study showed clearly that arts games were easily incorporated into early childhood programs for 2 to 5-year olds. The teachers reported that the arts games provided positive experiences for their children, encouraged a range of responses, catered for a range of developmental levels and, generally, were open to encourage individualised responses. Specifically they noted the potential benefits of arts games to the children's social development, physical development, cognitive development and creativity. The children also demonstrated that the arts games were a positive addition to the program. The children's responses indicated that they found the games enjoyable and stimulating.

The researchers also concluded that the teachers' training was influential in their implementation of the arts games. While at all times the teachers were thoroughly professional and positive in their interactions, their playing of the games did not, in the researchers' opinion, achieve optimal levels of creativity and artistry for the children. The combination of the teachers' varying confidence and lack of strong arts backgrounds meant that they were not always able to challenge and extend children or capitalise on incidents, suggestions or responses the children made.

It is simplistic to state that, had the arts games been implemented by practitioners of greater teaching experience and demonstrated expertise in the arts, the results would have been significantly different. However, it is relevant to consider that, with different arts training in their undergraduate teacher education course, these two teachers may well have felt more confident and competent to pursue the creativity and artistry inherent in the games.

The work of Jeanneret (1995) with generalist K-6 teachers highlights the strong correlation between the nature of teacher training and confidence in teaching music to children. She holds that teacher training courses that afford students practical opportunities to encounter music as musicians better equip them to engage the children they teach in appropriate and creative music experiences in the classroom. In early childhood arts education, this is certainly an issue that requires more investigation.

The researchers would contend that a replication of this study would be highly desirable, using a greater number and variety of arts games, facilitated by early childhood educators with a range of arts teaching backgrounds and years of teaching experience. This would assist the field in better understanding what links there may be between training, years of teaching experience and arts teaching competencies. Given the already overcrowded undergraduate early childhood program in most universities it would appear unlikely that the arts will suddenly assume a greater place or command more time. Consequently, it provides a significant challenge to make existing arts programs operate more effectively to better prepare graduates to teach not only with skill, but with creativity.

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